Performance of direct air capture process in honeycomb channel configuration: A CFD study

Majid Nejadseifi*. Shervin Karimkashi**. Tero Tynjälä*. Payman Jalali*

*Laboratory of Thermodynamics, School of Energy Systems, Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology, Lappeenranta, 53850, Finland (Tel: 358-415750813; e-mail: majid.nejadseifi@lut.fi, tero.tynjala@lut.fi, payman.jalali@lut.fi).

** Laboratory of Energy conversion and systems, Department of Mechanical Engineering, School of Engineering Sciences, Aalto university, Espoo, 02150, Finland (Tel: +358505602614; e-mail: shervin.karimkashiarani@aalto.fi)

Abstract: This study presents a kinetic reaction modeling method for direct air capture (DAC) process of CO2 adsorption using computational fluid dynamics (CFD). Here, CO2 is adsorbed by amine coated airsurface contact area. The Langmuir model is employed to represent the kinetics of CO2 adsorption. Despite neglecting the diffusive phase of the adsorption, which is dominant only in the later stages of adsorption, the surface reaction model gives a satisfactory representation of the adsorption for a major part of the process. Honeycomb reactors with coated adsorbent may yield a better control of reaction rate and pressure drop compared to commonly used packed bed adsorption columns. Their enhanced performance in distributing the flow homogeneously between and within channels creates unique features for the reactor. In this study, we have analyzed mechanical and electrical energy demand for adsorbing CO2 per unit mass of adsorbed CO2 as a function of air flow rate. Adsorption performance of honeycomb structure is anticipated to significantly improve in comparison to the packed beds.

Keywords: CFD, Hexagonal channel, adsorption, Direct Air Capture, surface reaction

1. INTRODUCTION

From scientific viewpoints, excess amount of CO2 in atmosphere causes climate change with making oceans more acidic (Wang et al., 2011). As the solution for this problem, we need to replace fossil primary energy sources with CO2 neutral energy sources. However, there is still a significant release of CO2 (33 billion tons per year in 2021) which indicates great challenges ahead of fixing global warming (Zhongming et al., 2021). The negative consequences of CO2 accumulation in the atmosphere will exist for thousands of years, even if emissions stop today (Solomon et al., 2009). So, there will be also needed to remove CO2 out of the atmospheric air, which is addressed as negative emissions. In this context, we should increase annual CO2 removals from the atmosphere to 10 billion tons of CO2 by 2050 (McQueen et al., 2021). It is a challenging objective, which makes scientists to explore different ways to find the most efficient method. One promising method is the Direct Air Capture (DAC), which removes CO2 directly from the air (Sanz-Pérez et al., 2016).

In order to obtain a comprehensive and detailed analysis, computational fluid dynamics (CFD) simulations can be performed. In a series of studies (Deutschmann et al., 2001; Tischer and Deutschmann, 2005; Nejadseifi et al.,2024), a modern multi-dimensional approach to detailed modeling of fluid flow transfer processes and chemical kinetics have been developed. Specifically, there has been critical evaluation of plug flow, boundary layer, and general three-dimensional models for simulating steady-state transport processes and chemistry in a honeycomb channel flow (Klenov et al., 2009).

In any gas-solid contact system, such as in CO2 capture processes, maximizing the interface between gas and solid surfaces while minimizing the pressure drop is a crucial goal. This enhances CO2 capture efficiency and reduces the energy required for blowing air in direct air capture (DAC) systems. Ceramic monoliths, due to their high surface area to volume ratio, have emerged as prime candidates for DAC contactors. They serve as excellent supports for CO2 sorbents, as demonstrated by several studies (Choi et al., 2011; Rodriguez -Mosqueda et al., 2018; Thakkar et al., 2016). Monoliths are also recognized for their minimal pressure drop (Thakkar et al., 2016). Recently, Fu and Davis (2023) demonstrated that employing monoliths as air contactors in DAC significantly reduces energy consumption compared to fixed beds. Verougstraete et al. (2020) have proposed the use of a carbon monolith for DAC to facilitate rapid heating and cooling, thereby achieving shorter adsorption-desorption cycles. Monoliths are comprised of straight channels with various cross-section shapes. Depending on their intended application, monoliths can adopt cylindrical, cubic, or hexagonal shapes. Sorbents are applied to the walls of these channels. In the case of CO2 capture, gaseous CO2 diffuses from the air stream to the walls of the monolith channels, where it is subsequently adsorbed by the sorbents. Improving the transfer of CO2 to the sorbent surface means a higher process efficiency and energy saving (Jiang et al., 2023).

In this paper, simulations are carried out for monolithic contactor reactor with conventional straight channels. By changing the hexagonal channel flow rate, we promote the CO2 transport to the sorbent-gas interface and investigate its effect on CO2 capture rate. Simulations are conducted under atmospheric pressure and isothermal conditions at 25 C. The computational CFD package of ANSYS-Fluent, V. 2021 R2 has been used for the simulations. Upon solving the governing equations, steady flow profiles across the channel, local mass conversion between channel surface and gas, variation of CO2 concentration at the channel outlet, pressure drop across the channel and power consumption per absorbed CO2 are investigated.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Sorbent coating and reactor model

In our simulations, a solid sorbent coat on an aluminum support of hexagonal straight channels is constructed. Typical samples of such hexagonal monoliths are presented in Fig. 1 and cross section of meshed symmetrical view in Fig. 2. For simplifying simulations, one sixth of the hexagonal cross section is considered (triangular symmetrical channel). The schematic of the single symmetrical hexagonal reactor is shown Fig. 1, where the air flows through. Considering narrow channel and lower flow velocities, the air flow can be assumed confidently laminar.

Fig. 1. A. schematical view of the symmetric hexagonal channel.

2.2 Mathematical description of Transport Equations:

The steady flow and transient reactive flow of air including CO2 is simulated in the hexagonal channel in which CO2 reacts with the sorbent covering the walls of the hexagonal channel. First, steady flow is solved and only the reaction part is transient. Due to small amount of CO2 in the air flow, it is assumed that the reactions don't have any effect on flow. The Navier–Stokes equations(1,2,3) for incompressible singlephase fluid (air) solved. Mass transport equation (1) considered as time dependent, but momentum equation (2), which is taken as steady state are:

Fig. 2. Cross section mesh view of hexagonal channel cross section prepared for simulations.

$$
\nabla \cdot \mathbf{u} = 0 \tag{1}
$$

$$
(\nabla \cdot \mathbf{u})\mathbf{u} = -\frac{\nabla p}{\rho} + \frac{\mu}{\rho} \nabla^2 \mathbf{u}
$$
 (2)

 The inlet and outlet boundary conditions are velocity inlet and pressure outlet, respectively. No-slip wall boundary condition is applied over the sidewalls of the hexagonal channel. Flow is considered isothermal and energy equation is not taken into account, due to neglective share of adsorption heat to overall heat capacity of the flow. After solving steady Navier-Stokes equations for the velocity field, u , it is used in the transient CO2 species transport equation to solve it for CO2 concentration C:

$$
\frac{\partial C}{\partial t} + u \nabla. C = D \nabla^2 C \tag{3}
$$

Here, C represents the concentration of CO2 in the interstitial space, and D is the diffusion coefficient of $CO2$ in air. There is no source term in this equation since CO2 is not produced or consumed within the flow. However, CO2 adsorption occurs over the reactive surface of the channel. We apply a surface reaction model over the surface to consider CO2 adsorption. At the inlet, C is known and remains constant over time. The outlet is governed by a zero diffusive flux condition for CO2. No mass flux is allowed through the sidewall except that made via reaction model.

For reaction, only simple one-step reaction is considered. The reaction rate is calculated at the wall surface for the reaction of CO2 with amine. The following kinetic equations (4, 5) are taken as representative of several complex reactions:

$$
CO2 + RNH2 \rightleftharpoons^{kf}_{kb} RNH_2^+ COO^-
$$
 (4)

$$
r = k_{langmuir} C_{CO}
$$
 (5)

Equation (4) is the simplified representation of reactions, where capture of CO2 occurs in the case of one primary amine group reacting with CO2. (Choi et al., 2009; Elfving and Sainio, 2021; Sanz-Pérez et al., 2016). In (4) R is the chain of atoms which is not participating in the reaction. In real physics, there is both forward and backward reactions, however, the model assumes that reaction occurs only in forward direction. Note that at moderate temperature of 25°C, assuming the irreversibility of the adsorption process is plausible if the sorbent has a strong affinity for CO2. Sorbent material properties used were same as in the adsorption modelling. Gas mixture inside the DAC-unit is estimated to contain only carbon dioxide (Elfving and Sainio, 2021). Equation (5) shows the relation between rection rate r and concentration of reaction mixture components CO2 (C_{CO2}). Also, r is the reaction rate based on Langmuir kinetic model and $k_{lanamuir}$ is the reaction kinetic constant. The Langmuir equation assumes that the adsorption of the gas to the sorbent is a reversible process and occurs only on a homogeneous surface with a fixed number of adsorption sites without considering the effects of the water vapor (one-step process). Since the purpose is to focus mainly on the adsorption of CO2 during fast adsorption phase, selected single-step process model is considered to be sufficient for the analysis. Reaction kinetic constant $k_{lanamuir}$ is obtained from fitting simulation results to the experiments (Elfving and Sainio, 2021). The fitting results are specific to a given reaction and depend on temperature, humidity, and other reaction conditions. The unit of k depends on the order of the reaction, which can be determined experimentally. For the case of CO2 adsorption, the rate of reaction is directly proportional to the concentrations of both CO2 and the adsorbent. This means that increasing the concentration of sorbent or CO2 will increase the rate of reaction.

3.RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Fluid flow, pressure drop, concentration.

The calculation of pressure drop is performed in various mesh sizes to verify the mesh independence. As seen from Fig. 2, we have used 12 meshes per reactive side of the hexagon(wall). In near wall, there is boundary layer and also surface reaction occurrence; therefore, it's necessary that meshes near wall is in layered shape and structured (hexahedral), while in the other regions only unstructured tetrahedral bigger meshes are enough. Table 1 shows the dependence of pressure drop on mesh resolution. For the coarse, fine and finer meshes, the number of nodes are 136421, 431597, 647372, respectively. The results for the pressure drop for different mesh sizes are shown in Table 1, which reveal the discrepancy in the pressure drop. The case with 12 mesh has the minimum difference with the neighboring number of meshes, and it can be chosen sufficient for the simulation. Flow is solved at steady state with 5000 iterations to ensure the convergence while the species transport model is off.

Six different inlet velocities, 0.004 m/s, 0.007 m/s, 0.01 m/s, 0.02 m/s, 0.1 m/s, 0.3 m/s are set for fixed hexagonal channel. The dependence of pressure drop-velocity is shown in Fig 3. The results demonstrate a monotonic increase of pressure drop with velocity. Higher pressure drops mean a higher fan power requirement. In this work, length is kept constant although downsizing (shortening the channel length) can help with reducing the pressure drop.

To understand the adsorption phenomenon inside hexagonal channel and its efficiency, it is essential to compare the results with other geometries. In previous works, adsorption performance of honeycomb structure is compared to the packed beds for different sorbents and gases and also for CO2 adsorption. (Jänchen et al., 2015; Querejeta et al., 2022; Sakwa-Novak et al., 2016; Wajima et al., 2011). To this end, a simulation has been conducted also for the cylindrical packed bed system by the length of 1.77 cm and the diameter of 0.9 cm. This packed bed is consisted of particles with the diameter of 0.6 mm and particle volume fraction of 0.61. The working fluid temperature and humidity are taken as 25° C and 2% . The hexagonal channel length is 1.77cm, but its side length is allowed to have different values. Figure 4 represents the time variation of CO2 concentration at the outlets of hexagonal unit and the packed bed during the adsorption process for the inlet velocity being as 0.13 m/s. Note that CO2 adsorption on an amine-based sorbent is fast. A key benefit of using hexagonal channels in a DAC contactor is the lower pressure drop, in comparison to the packed beds or the channels with other shapes of cross sections, while keeping the reactive area still high. Surface reactions serve as the main transport mechanism at this study. For qualitative comparison between hexagonal channels and packed beds, several hexagonal channels with various side lengths are considered in this study. Variation of the side length of hexagons affects the rate of adsorption and as seen in Fig. 4, for hexagon side $X=1.1$ mm, the results for hexagonal channel and packed bed channel are pretty close. In future works, we will optimize the channel based on geometry and compare the system with similar-capacity packed bed systems. Figure 4 indicates that in an adsorption system whether open channels like the hexagonal one or a packed bed, the sorbent saturates after some time. For instance, for the hexagonal channel with hexagon side of $X=1.1$ mm, as time advances to around 5000 seconds, the adsorption site starts to saturate which is similar to what happens in our studied packed bed (Nejadseifi et al., under preparation). Following this comparative study, we will demonstrate a wider study on hexagonal units having the length of 1 m, where we investigate the effects of velocity on adsorption process of CO2. The purpose is to investigate the performance of hexagonal reactor for various flow rates. At some point, since there is no experimental data for hexagonal cases, but for the packed bed with small size (length $=1.77$ cm) experiments results were available and CFD simulation for packed bed fitted to them, while deviation was below 5% (Nejadseifi et al., under preparation; Elfving and Sainio, 2021). Therefore, for small scale hexagon with length of L=1.77 cm, result of CFD simulations qualitatively compared with packed bed. And at the following, we have used the same reaction coefficients for big size hexagonal channel.

Figure 5 shows the CO2 outlet concentration variation with time for large hexagonal channels with the length of 1 m for the hexagonal side of 0.58 cm at different velocities. As it is observed, increasing the velocity shortens the time to reach saturation. For the velocity of $V=0.1$ m/s, the outlet CO2 concentration begins to rise between the time 0.5×10^4 and

Fig. 4. CO2 Concentration(ppm) variation at the outlet of hexagonal channel by time. Hexagonal channel and packed bed length is 1.77 cm. Air flow temperature is 25 °C and humidity is 2 vol-%. Velocity=0.13m/s.

Fig. 5. CO2 Concentration(ppm) change at the outlet of hexagonal channel by time. Hexagonal channel length is 1 m. Air flow temperature is 25 °C and humidity is 2 vol-%.

 1.0×10^4 s. This is the time where system moves toward full saturation which is achieved around $t \sim 1.0 \times 10^4$ s. For $V=0.3$ m/s, the outlet concentration rises almost from the beginning of the adsorption until it reaches full saturation around $t{\sim}0.5\times10^4$ s.

3.2 Techno-economics of CO2 capture in hexagonal channel

In designing a DAC system comprised of adsorptiondesorption cycle in a monolithic contactor, air flow rate, as well as adsorption and desorption CO2 concentration cut-off values (target CO2 capture) play prominent roles in the final CO2 capture cost. It should be mentioned that the focus of the current work is only on the adsorption stage. As the flow rate increases, more CO2 is captured. However, higher flow rates are also associated with larger pressure drops that impose higher cost for consumed blowing power. Figures 6-8 present capture rates, demanded blowing (fan) power, and electricity consumption per ton of captured CO2 for hexagonal channel contactor per unit length of channel at the side length of the hexagon as 0.58 cm. Air velocity ranges from 0.004 m/s to 0.3 m/s.

Figure 6 shows the variation of adsorption completion time (time for outlet concentration to reach 300 ppm) for a range of velocities between 0.004 and 0.3 m/s. Smaller panel inside Figs. 6-8 showed detailed values within small ranges of velocities. As it can be seen, increasing the velocity of air decreases the time of adsorption. However, experimental validations are required to confirm the performance of CO2 adsorption at higher velocities.

In this study, the sensitivity analysis is aimed to obtain how the energy consumption related to air blow varies with air velocity as part of adsorption process, where the desorption stage is not considered. It can be noticed that in very small velocities, the saturation time increases exponentially as velocity decreases. Normally, very large saturation time characterizes the adsorption process of DAC as inefficient or expensive from the energy consumption point of view.

Fig. 6. Variation of adsorption reaction time (Time to reach 300 ppm) by velocity. Hexagonal channel length is 1 m. Air flow temperature is 25 °C and humidity is 2 vol-%.

The consumed blowing power cost per ton of captured CO2 is estimated based on the assumption that the cost is proportional to the energy required in adsorption process. Based on the design of our DAC system, we assume that the energy is all provided by electricity. In the adsorption cycle, air is blown through the contactor and the contactor is kept at constant temperature (~25 °C). The blowing(fan) power for adsorption

is therefore estimated by (6):

$$
P = \frac{Q.\Delta p}{\eta} \tag{6}
$$

where P is the electrical power consumption during each adsorption cycle, ΔP is the air pressure drop for each hexagon, and Q is the volumetric flow rate of the air. The efficiency η is

the effectiveness of the system in converting electrical energy into mechanical energy to move the air, which is considered as a fixed value of 0.8. Figure 7 shows the variation of consumed power by velocity. For both higher ranges of velocities $0.1 \le$ $V \le 0.3$ m/s and lower ranges $0.004 \le V \le 0.02$ m/s, we see a non-linear relation between the blower (fan) power and Velocity. Then, the total electricity consumption per ton of adsorbed CO2 per each cycle is calculated by (7):

$$
E = \frac{P.t}{1000.m_{CO2}}\tag{7}
$$

where P is the electrical power consumption, t is the adsorption time of each cycle (the time for CO2 concentration to reach 300 ppm). Obviously, it is not efficient to run the system after saturation. Also, m_{CO2} is the amount of CO2 adsorbed during each cycle. Figure 8 shows the electricity consumption per unit mass of CO2 for various velocities, which displays the same trend as in Fig. 7 except for the lower range of velocity that turns to be linear.

Fig. 8. Electricity consumption per / Adsorbed mass of CO2.vs. velocity. Hexagonal channel length is 1 m. Air flow temperature is 25° C and humidity is 2 vol-%.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Recently, CO2 removal from air, also known as the Direct Air Capture (DAC), has attracted more attention due to its promise in reducing the greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. However, costs associated with DAC have been the main obstacle for large-scale commercialization. Here, we presented a novel hexagonal shaped contactor and investigated performance of adsorption under various flow rates. Direct air flow inside straight channel is more commercialized with a higher demand because of its lower pressure drop, which makes it practical for large scale applications. Such a straight channel application is supposed to be more economic than non-straight channels or packed bed reactors. The techno-economic analysis showed how the adsorption stage is dependent of various air velocities. Focus of this work was on lower ranges of velocities ($V \le 0.3$)

m/s); where the flow regime remained laminar; This study could be repeated for higher ranges of velocities at the ranges of velocities ($V \ge 2$ m/s) at the future. As future work, we also perform experiments on the hexagonal channel contactor, and examine pressure drop, wall thickness effects, and hexagons side length. We will focus more on novel numerical methods and investigate using novel contactors shapes.

This is a preliminary study to shed light on the issue. Existing set of results are not covering a broad range, and we know that. However, most of the previous works are laboratory-scale experimental study and maneuver on the different aspects including fluid mechanic parts or technoeconomic. However, since types of studied barely done earlier, there is big differences on data reported by different authors, especially when it comes to cost estimation. Importance of these results are somehow can be shown on the cost dependence on pressure drop and air volume flow rate. At the future, if desorption phase is studied beside adsorption phase, this hexagonal geometry can be optimized for minimal consumption of electrical energy for unit of adsorbed CO2.

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